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Thumbs up

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The thumbs up gesture is very common and generally has a positive meaning, at least in Western cultures. There are many different interpretations of a thumbs up, so you need to pay attention to the context around the gesture.

Here are some possible meanings of a thumbs up and some contrasts with a thumbs down posture.

Way to go

A thumbs up signals approval of something said or done by another person. It is an affirming gesture that does not require words. The gesture conveys pride in what the other person has done.

I agree

When someone wants to signal agreement, the thumbs up movement will convey that message clearly. Of course, the opposite is true when the thumb is pointing down.

This meaning was evident in the famous “thumbs down” nay vote by John McCain in the Senate in July 2017, when he cast the pivotal declining vote on the Repeal of Obamacare. He said no words while casting his vote, but his thumb did the talking for him. Mitch McConnell was wincing in the background.

Go get ‘em

The thumbs up gesture is a way of encouraging an athlete or any person who is going into competition. The connotation is “I’m rooting for you.”

I’ve got your back

The gesture is often used to signal support for another person who is feeling unsure about doing an upcoming task correctly. The meaning here is “don’t worry, you will do great.”

Gratitude

The thumbs up sign can mean “thank you” when someone has done something special. It can also be a way of acknowledging a thank you from another person. Here the meaning is “you’re welcome.”

Comfort

When a person is hurting or grieving, a thumbs up gesture might be used as a show of support and empathy for the person. Obviously you need to consider the personal preferences of the individual and your relationship with that person.

Cultural differences

Like most body language, the thumbs up gesture is culturally specific, so do not use the gesture in Australia, Greece, Russia, or the Middle East because it may be interpreted as “up yours.” This is particularly true if the thumb is jerked upward as in a hitch-hiking motion.

Be alert when you see a thumbs up gesture that it may mean many different things depending on the situation involved or the culture in which it is used. The interpretation is also highly dependent on the relationship between the two people. Use the gesture when it will be helpful and well received.

This is a part in a series of articles on “Body Language” by Bob Whipple “The Trust Ambassador.”